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Message from Moscow

A Book That Can Help You Feel What Russia Is Like

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When I went recently to Moscow I took along a book that might help me to understand Inscrutable Russia. I read it during my trip, and if history records that I ever performed an act of philanthropy, it is this: that I have recommended this book to you.

It is the most revealing book I know of, on what it is like to live in the Soviet Union. It gives a focus, a sense of perspective about values, and about foreign policy as valuable as the second of one's two eyes, which gives the dimension for seeing things whole.

I do not know who wrote the book, and do not particularly care, provided he receives this token of my gratitude to him. He is young man, who went to Moscow for a couple of years to do graduate work. Because he found out so much about Russia, coming to know so many of the intellectuals, artists, students, working men, and even bureaucrats, he does not give his name, fearing that he might thereby harm those who befriended him.

He signs himself merely "An Observer," and calls his book, simply, "Message From Moscow," and writes as only someone could who had spent several years in Russia, who knew Russian fluently when he arrived, whose powers of observation are striking, and who writes with literary skill.

Mr. Observer, by the way, is a socialist. But throughout the book, what he writes about is the great failures of the Soviet system. The titanic failures—the extent of which are absolutely unknown even by the sharpest western observers.

"The failures that catch my eye, these astounding departures from civilized standards (civilized in the broadest sense of the word), are almost unknown outside Russia. Every intelligent Russian knowns them, lives with them, has learnt to take them for granted; often he no longer recognizes them—or, if he does, merely shrugs his houlders."

Those who jump to the conclusion that the book is mere generality shouldn't: it is the most specific indictment I have ever read of any single society. But it is important to understand that however much we take communications for granted, it is impossible to imagine just how closed a society can actually succeed in being.

Moscow, for instance, has two great national papers. "Most of my friends," Observer remarked in his diary, "do not bother to look at the national newspapers for weeks in succession. Among liberal students, in fact, the measure of a man is often taken by his newspaper-reading habits: if he reads Pravda or Izvestia for anything but their unconscious humor, they know they will have nothing in common with him."

Russians communicate with themselves—as people, but almost always with the kind of reserve one would expect from the progeny of Stalinism. The man to whom you are confiding your bitterness against the bureaucracy may be a paid agent of that bureaucracy, and never mind that he is your cousin, or your roommate at college, or your wife's brother.

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The nearest thing that can be compared to a running critique of the society is the jokes, the colloquial, grim, somehow insouciant underground humor that gets around in Soviet society, even as some of it got around in Orwell's 1984. Much of the humor, Observer reports, is too idiomatic for transcription. "I understand best," he says, the "slight stories that bring slight smiles."

But one cannot live on jokes alone, and the Brotherhood in Russia exists, if only barely, hugging their Solzhenitsyn to their bosoms, and treating each new day as Ivan Denisovich did. The mass of the people take their pleasure from the country, the fabled Russian country; from sex—lots and lots of utterly free sex; from vodka, and from easy employment.

The ballet and symphony are beautiful, but are available only to the tiniest fraction of the population. "There are no genuine film personalities, no pop groups, no new dances, no crazes of any sort . . . In this respect, (Moscow) is unquestionably the dullest major city in the world."

A book for everyone to read, particularly during a period when we are rather more caught up in the ugliness of war, than in the encephalophonic hideousness of the slave state. Such a state as Russia's, the misunderstanding of which has for generations misdirected our foreign policy.